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Food Riots and the Politics of Provisions in World History

John Bohstedt

Summary

The food riots of 2007-8 in dozens of developing countries placed food security on the agendas of the global political economy. Material outcomes remain to be assessed. The problematic of the politics of provisions is: Under what circumstances do the common people's necessities create a political necessity for their rulers to act? What combination of ingredients gives them political leverage (or not)? Food riots (crowd violence: usually seizing food, intercepting carts and barges, or setting prices) set in motion political processes that often led to food relief and/or repression. To riot about food, rioters needed much more than motivations of hunger and outrage, or else world history would consist mostly of food riots. In addition rioters needed both sufficient solidarities to be able to act collectively, and sufficient confidence that the benefits (getting food, both immediately and in more sustained supply) would outweigh the risks and costs of repression and punishment. The latter would be based on reciprocal relationships with the rulers. The outcomes of such 'trials-by-ordeal' were then entered into social memory to be consulted in the next crisis. Of course rulers also had their social memories and political calculations. So the 'politics of provisions' – the political economy of food crises and their resolutions – has typically included such components as: political, social, and economic structures; the players' sociopolitical assets, capacities, and relationships; shared ideologies; strategic bargaining in the moment between chief actors; and accidental factors. Those components vary from one time and place to another, so this paper compares the politics of provisions in: pre-modern England and France; famines in Ireland and India; 'famine-proofed' Ming and Qing China; Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine; the IMF austerity riots of the 1970s and 80s; and the food riots of 2008, particularly in Egypt, West Africa, and Haiti. The point of such comparisons is not to construct a unified theory of provision politics, but to illuminate significant parameters that shape policies and conflicts over food.

Keywords: food riots; political economy of food; food regimes; politics of provisions.

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Introduction

When food security is threatened, the politics of provisions makes the news. In eighteenth-century England, harvest failures were not passively accepted as ‘natural’ disasters. Far from it! In the ‘golden age of English food riots’ (1740–1801), when grain prices doubled or tripled, more than six hundred food riots crackled across England and Wales (Bohstedt 2010). By ‘food riot’ I mean simply an incident of crowd violence or coercion concerning food. For instance, crowds seized wagonloads of corn, attacked flour-mills, and forcibly lowered food prices in marketplaces or farmyards. Again and again they cried out, ‘We’d rather be hanged than starved!’ Occasionally they were – hanged or shot – though not starved. ‘Hanged’ or ‘starved’ dramatised poles in the relationship between rioters and rulers, for both referred to something done *by* rulers *to* rioters.

In other words, those stark prospects sprang from ‘the politics of provisions’, by which I mean struggles over food between ‘the people’ and their rulers in food crises.¹ Those struggles might take various forms such as food rioting, demonstrating, parading effigies, or petitioning. They would sometimes result in emergency aid and sometimes in ongoing policies. Food riots were a kind of ‘collective bargaining by riot’ (Hobsbawm 1952), in which rioters transgressed the normal bounds of order, in the hope of compelling their rulers to act. Those transgressions were usually limited, perhaps following traditional forms and customary ‘rules of the game’ recognised by all parties. They stopped short of a direct attack on the regime that would wreck bargaining and provoke lethal penalties like shooting or hanging.

Moreover, the interactions between crowds and rulers (and others) in the ‘politics of provisions’ were shaped by prior social/political habits and relationships. In some regimes, especially authoritarian ones, the politics of provisions might be founded on a social contract (implicit or explicit): that the people accepted a regime as legitimate so long as it ensured their food security. The politics of provisions might include a widely shared ‘moral economy’ relating to rights to food at an affordable price. But it also crucially rested on both horizontal social networks among the commoners that enabled them to act collectively with enough discipline to give them leverage; and vertical relationships with rulers, based on elections, parties, ethnicity, clientelism, charisma or patronage. Furthermore, the politics of provisions in most societies has typically consisted of a stream of experience over time that created stored memories, lessons and expectations about how food crises have been and will be dealt with by rulers, commoners, and possibly others. These shared experiences and memories provide provision politics’ players a catalogue of what is possible in their polity. Finally, since the politics of provisions is shaped by the living socio-political tissue of a particular community, rioters and rulers in different places interact differently in food crises according to their own species and dynamics of politics, as we shall see.

Hunger alone does not explain food riots. Most journalists and many historians new to the terrain assume that food rioters are the poorest, hungriest people, but there is little evidence for that.² On the contrary, severe deprivation seems to de-mobilise people. Food riots are not only about hunger, but also about food rights. The primal right to survive makes food a matter of ‘moral economy’, as in Edward Thompson’s seminal discussion. But as he recognised, moral economy is specific to each polity, so it must be defined anew for different places and times (Thompson 1971 and 1991; Bohstedt 1992). Naomi Hossain tells us that a contemporary moral economy comprises two principles. First, the people have a right to eat (Hossain and Kalita, forthcoming; Hossain 2013). That right lives in the gut, where hunger

¹ I am very grateful to Dr Lauren Sneyd for her very constructive reading and comments.

² For instance, Lester R. Brown of the Earth Policy Institute: ‘... the planet’s poorest 2 billion people... Those who are barely hanging on to the lower rungs of the globe – contribute [sic] ... to revolutions and upheaval.’ (Brown 2011). Naomi Hossain and Devangana Kalita point out that ‘cross-country work [often] ... relies substantially on ‘spasmodic’ explanations of why people riot that reduce people to bellied bodies.’ (Hossain and Kalita, forthcoming: 3).

meets justice. The right to food has been recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in the declarations of the World Food Summits of 1974 and 1996.³ Moreover, that right to sustenance justifies a 'law of necessity' recognised since ancient Roman times: that when food security is threatened, the right to survival trumps normal laws of property and order.⁴ Second, the people expect their rulers to secure that right to eat, in return for popular recognition of their rulers' authority – a social contract. Such a social contract is a cornerstone of a *positive* politics of provisions, in those polities where the people's necessities create political necessities for rulers. We hear that demand voiced by a 2008 rioter in Burkina Faso: 'Enough is enough! Prices are rising daily. And since we have no channel for communicating with the authorities, we have chosen the streets to show our discontent' (Harsch 2008).

So when do the people's necessities become the ruler's necessity – to act? The problematic of the politics of provisions is to locate the missing link – between norms and motivations, like the moral economy, and results, like food in people's stomachs or the policies to put it there, or otherwise, continuing hunger. It takes more than hunger and a moral economy to understand food riots; otherwise world history would consist of endless food riots, for hunger and injustice are always with us. Collective action does not just happen, as activists know. It is not a simple immediate product of shared motivations. It needs to be explained: What enables people to take *collective* transgressive actions such as food rioting? What calculations of risks and gains do rulers and potential rioters make? What kinds of polities foster food riots? And what *varieties* of food riots do they foster? Students of collective protests used to speak of 'political opportunity structures'. But even 'political opportunity structures' are mostly about the conditions facing rioters and other actors – they are still about motivations and calculations. Beyond those intentions and decisions, what traditions and experience, relationships and resources, and what dynamic strategic bargaining in the political moment must be part of our explanation of both the preconditions and the *outcomes* of popular mobilisations? What gives such political mobilisation the leverage that achieves results? In short, what makes bargaining by food riot work politically – or not work?

First, food riots *are* politics since they comprise such political ingredients as:

- Physical force (or the threat of it) on both sides, the basis of all politics
- Capacities for action: state strengths or weaknesses, solidarities among rioters, and relations between rioters and rulers
- Strategic bargaining between rioters and rulers – around both 'food rights' and 'rules of the game.' Food riots, E.P. Thompson taught us, open up a 'political space for bargaining' (Thompson 1971)
- Pragmatic tactical judgements that frame that bargaining, and that are shaped by past experience and current calculation: 'What is *within reach* of this crowd?' 'What is the wise course for this ruler?'
- Outcomes of 'who gets what,' distributions of both public and private goods.

³ 'In 1974, governments attending the World Food Conference proclaimed that 'every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition...' In November 1996, the Rome Declaration, adopted by 112 nations and 70 representatives from other countries, begins: 'We, the Heads of State and Government, or our representatives, gathered at the World Food Summit at the invitation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.' Archived by the UN's FAO at: www.fao.org/docrep/003/W3613E/W3613E00.HTM and www.fao.org/wfs/main_en.htm

⁴ '[In] the common law in England and the United States, and the earlier Roman law ... the basic rules of property will normally be suspended in the face of necessity ... This necessity exception is narrowly defined to cover only those cases where there is imminent peril to life or to property.' (Epstein 1995: 113). We could call this 'Jean Valjean's law', since we intuitively sympathise with Victor Hugo's protagonist in *Les Misérables* when he is jailed for stealing a loaf of bread. See Bohstedt (2010: 10).

When food crises bring into play such resources, relationships, bargaining and outcomes, the contest is constructed from, though not determined by, ingredients of the prevailing polity.

Perhaps our explanation of the outcomes of provision politics might be like a recipe for a cake (which involves not only ingredients, but their chemical interaction at certain temperatures for a period of time). Such a recipe for an outcome (cake) might look something like this: 'Combine (for instance) three cups of massive mobilisation,⁵ one cup of elite wisdom (if unavailable, military sympathy may be substituted), one cup of ruler-vulnerability,⁶ two cups of shared moral economy, a pinch of sweetener such as family or ethnic affinity, a cup of food availability, three tablespoons of established patterns of bargaining between rulers and rioters, the yeast of leadership (established or emergent), and a mystery ingredient added by a sprite (perhaps a small boy or other external intervention).⁷ Bake in the intense heat of international media attention and riots in neighbouring countries, but only for three months' – and you get such and such a cake. Of course, like other elements of national cuisines, the cake will vary according to different cultures' ingredients and tastes.

Some polities inhibit food riots. Other polities encourage food riots, of varying forms and dynamics. In this paper we will examine food riots and the politics of provisions from early modern England and France to Qing China to the Latin America, Africa and Asia of recent years. The object is not to discover some unified formula that could 'predict' food riots, but rather to discern and illuminate the parameters or key variables ('ingredients') at work in different countries' provision politics and outcomes. Different countries' cakes will have different recipes and perhaps timing, but comparative analysis will reveal ingredients in one case that might also be considered in others. The point is not so much to find a 'master recipe,' as to realise that, between the actors' intentions and the outcomes, there is in fact a recipe, an interaction of processes that make up a politics of provisions. How can we explain the political leverage (or lack of it) of popular mobilisations that can move the powerful (or not) so as to achieve outcomes? In short, in what circumstances do the people's necessities become the rulers' necessity – to act?

⁵ Food riots or some other form of popular mobilisation.

⁶ Theda Skocpol inserted the key moments of ruler vulnerability ('crisis of state') in her powerful theory to explain 'social [total] revolutions' such as those of France, Russia and China. (Skocpol 1976, 1979).

⁷ This would be an error term ('and here a miracle happens'), if this were a scientific formula.

1. The politics of provisions in eighteenth century England

Early modern England's politics of provisions featured food riots that were in many places frequent, disciplined and successful. To take one example, the food crisis of 1795–6 generated some 170 riots of several distinct varieties, depending upon different communities' tissues of sociopolitical relations (Bohstedt 1983). Provision politics took several forms:

- In Devon's stable small towns, close networks and reciprocities *among* the common people and *with* their rulers permitted crowds to engage in 'orderly disorder', forcibly lowering prices. In response, town fathers set up food relief depots, aimed not at chronic paupers but at the more respectable working families who rioted.
- By contrast, in rapidly growing industrial boom-towns such as Manchester and Birmingham that lacked such close relationships, food riots were chaotic: crowds ransacked the markets. Instead of face-to-face bargaining, capable civic leaders learned to set up mass subscription collections to support big soup kitchens to reduce popular tensions.
- The agrarian countryside, however, was mostly quiet, because farm workers either got their food from the source or were cowed by close social control.
- In rural industrial districts, miners and weavers – 'veterans' of collective action – also commandeered food shipments and markets, but were not as constrained by close relations⁸ with their local rulers as were small-town Devon rioters.
- London was *sui generis*: the capital was protected by lots of grain reserves and lots of troops, in short, lots of ruling-class strength; it had few food riots.
- The rich evidence about these scores of incidents almost never mentions 'the poor'. It appears that the poor lacked the stamina and the social networks for collective action, that they were both too transient and too vulnerable to sanctions, by local poor-law officials, for instance.⁹

So the family tree of England's politics of provisions comprised varieties of bargaining by riot, varieties of the familiar interaction of food riot – repression – and relief. That family tree had evolved through centuries of political and economic transformations. The sixteenth-century Tudor dynasty proclaimed their paternalist care for their people's food as an essential attribute of the King as 'father over many families'.¹⁰ Then two seventeenth-century revolutions decentralised the political nation – and that paternalism – into dozens of local satrapies ruled by gentlemen magistrates (with occasional bourgeois upstarts) wielding both formal powers and informal patronage power, as though *in loco parentis*. Meanwhile the commercialisation of England into a market economy multiplied both consumers who had to buy their food, the lead actors in food riots, and marketplaces and shipping lanes, the stages on which they usually acted. Episodes of war and peace further affected social stresses, policies and peacekeeping. Within those evolving national contexts, rulers and rioters negotiated food crises in local bargaining in which rulers were usually within physical reach

⁸ That is, by sanctions made possible by familiarity, identification, and material patronage reciprocities.

⁹ For the poor as non-rioters in early modern England and France, see Bohstedt (1983: 39, 198), Bohstedt (2010: 40–3) and Bouton (1993: 109–12). E.P. Thompson called such sanctions 'the revenges of village paternalism'. The English Poor Law (1601) mandated a system of local support for the poor ('paupers'), funded by local property taxes, and administered by local officials. Such 'paupers' had a distinctly disadvantageous status in other matters.

¹⁰ In the words of Sir Robert Filmer, 'As the father over one family, so the King, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct, and defend the whole commonwealth.' (*Patriarcha*, 1680; end of chapter I) <http://www.constitution.org/eng/patriarcha.htm>

of rioters.¹¹ Such ‘bargaining’ was not necessarily verbal. Sometimes rioters and rulers gestured to each other in a customary political minuet. The variations of English provision politics depended on:

- the community politics framed by horizontal and vertical social networks, strategic interactions between rioters and rulers, and, often, both the moral economy and the protocol of riot they shared;
- rioters’ risks and opportunities: on the one hand, punishment and repression; on the other, relief supplies and soup kitchens that became routine responses to hard times – a first draft of the welfare state;¹²
- the deposit of those costly lessons in social memory banks to be drawn on by subsequent rioters and rulers.

Of course, even in regions of ‘orderly’ disorder, breaches of the protocol of riot could lead to capital penalties. When one Devon crowd destroyed a mill, a respectable blacksmith’s son who had led them was hanged with great ceremony at the scene of the riot. Sometimes amateur peacekeepers such as the Yeomanry, or volunteer cavalry, might panic and fire on the crowd (Bohstedt 1983: 1–3, 65). Those exceptions underscored the boundaries – and risks – of customary provision politics. Much more typically rioters stuck to the rules of the game to limit their liabilities. Rioters ‘aimed not at transforming the economic system, but rather at bending the system of power relations to cope in practical fashion with emergency conditions’ (Bohstedt 2010: 88). Eighteenth-century English gentlemen preferred to fund food relief that demonstrated their paternalism, rather than employ harsh repression that would unmask their power. Policing forces would also be costly. Food relief was cheaper and safer. In sum, the familiar *pas de deux* of food riots actually helped constitute the polity: food riots became so frequent as to be commonplace in many places because they worked – for both rioters and their rulers.

After 1800, changes in both food marketing and peacekeeping limited political opportunities for bargaining by riot. Food riots in those mushrooming industrial cities might divert their *distant* food suppliers toward safer markets, so they were no longer tolerated. Governments and gentlemen acquired low-cost local peacekeepers to suppress or prevent riots – the volunteer Yeomanry. The Napoleonic Wars enabled government to install army barracks in riot-prone cities. Traditional community reciprocities were replaced by radicalism and class conflict. In the longer run ‘improvement’ in agricultural productivity lowered food prices (Bohstedt 2010: 269–70). And so the ‘golden age’ of food riots, and their supporting ecology of provision politics, passed into history.

2. France

Early modern France had its own distinctive politics of provisions shaped within:

- a much more populous peasant-agrarian country; and
- a centralised state in which the duty of provisions rested squarely on the king.

¹¹ Exceptions to the local framework of provision politics include occasions of dearth when the government banned food exports, up to 1660 and after 1766 (Bohstedt, 2010: 109–12); and in 1795, the government’s attempt to purchase and import large emergency stores of corn (Bohstedt, 2010: 171, 174).

¹² Following the Provision of Meals Act of 1906–7, which provided for poor and hungry children to be fed at school-board schools, the Board of Education’s chief medical officer said in 1914, ‘Experience shows that food riots are inspired largely by the hunger of children; and if that problem can be met, a large operating factor in the causation of riots is removed.’ (Ross 1990: 186; cf. Bohstedt 2010: 259–60).

There is not enough space here for a full exploration, but suffice to say that compared with England, the much larger France had a comparable number of food riots,¹³ more physical repression, and not as much food relief. But centralised provision politics meant that one royal experiment with *laissez-faire* triggered hundreds of riots in the 1775 Flour War.¹⁴ By 1789, when royal paternalism had visibly failed amid multiple crises, the women of Paris marched to Versailles to get ‘the Baker, the Baker’s wife, and the Baker’s son’. A few years later, ideology and necessity produced the Jacobin *maximum* on bread prices, while cities sent their *armées révolutionnaires* into the countryside to seize food supplies (Cobb 1987) – an institutionalised form of food riots!

3. The British Empire: famines in Ireland and India

Of course an English politics of provisions was not always benevolent. In the British Empire, grass-roots social relationships of conquest (not reciprocity, as in England and France) generally ruled out bargaining-by-riot between commoners and rulers. Ireland, England’s first colony,¹⁵ lacked social contracts of legitimising reciprocity. As Terry Eagleton has said, ‘British sovereignty in Ireland never succeeded in establishing hegemony, as opposed to that blunter instrument known as power.’ (Eagleton 2005: 330). As Edward Thompson puts it, ‘There was no paternalist tradition to be activated by mass pressure, no space for political negotiation’ (Thompson 1991: 296). That impotence of provision politics could and did lead to famines.

Ireland had a much thinner tradition of food rioting than England.¹⁶ Only in a ribbon of eastern¹⁷ ports had eighteenth-century food riots won relief from mercantile civic leaders.¹⁸ Instead Ireland’s protest tradition was mostly dominated by ‘peasant outrages’ over land tenures – futile nocturnal sabotage attacks on cattle and hayricks, punished by hangings and transportations to Australia – poles apart from the noonday bargaining of English food rioters. By the Hungry Forties, however, two generations of political movements and secret societies seem to have created more plebeian networks. In 1842 Munster witnessed many riots to prevent food exports. In the Famine years of 1846–7 hundreds of incidents of direct action occurred, especially in Munster.¹⁹ Crowds plundered food stores and blocked exports, in some cases by shooting carthorses. Other violence was in protest at relief cuts and repulsive soups. Indeed, the Famine’s road-building sites may have created some solidarities for collective action.²⁰ But protest petered out when both stamina and food were exhausted. Somewhat like their English cousins, destitute peasants in the West were deathly quiet,

¹³ Thus 857 subsistence riots between 1614 and 1789 (Bouton 1993: 215). The French scholars who count riots, J. Nicolas and Guy Lemarchand, lump together a lot of ill-defined episodes. (Bouton 1993: 215 n. 3). For other seminal articles on French food riots, see: Bouton (2000), Kaplan (1994), Kaplan (1985), Kaplan (1977) and Tilly (1971). I have discussed French politics of provisions in greater detail in (Bohstedt 2014 forthcoming).

¹⁴ Bouton (1993: 317) for the riots in 1775. Nevertheless, the crown did not rescind Turgot’s decree lifting regulations in grain trading even despite a bad harvest.

¹⁵ Ireland in 1850 was not a colony but a part of the ‘United Kingdom’ created in 1801 – but like a colony, Ireland was still ruled by direct government from London and Dublin Castle, not by ‘responsible government.’

¹⁶ Kelly (1991–2), Dickson (1997), Magennis (2000), Kelly (1992), Wells (1996). Of course, the eastern urban concentration may be a function of reportage, and the shortage of local studies in many counties, which will be revised by further research such as Eiríksson’s (see below).

¹⁷ And a few west-coast ports such as Galway.

¹⁸ Kinealy (2002: 123–30) and Eiríksson (1997).

¹⁹ In counties Limerick, Cork, Tipperary and Clare – notably not the poorest counties. (Eiríksson 1997). violence resisting the taking of land.

²⁰ Kinealy (2002) and Eiríksson (1997).

lacking both the tradition and leadership for food riots, and local rulers' wealth for relief, and the Famine took a terrible toll on their numbers (Lumsden 2008).

The problem was not the availability of food or state capacity.²¹ In 1846 the Prime Minister, Robert Peel, imported mountains of maize into Ireland, while in 1847 official soup kitchens fed three million a day until they were prematurely shut down. Otherwise British Imperial policy adhered to *laissez-faire* dogma, touted as God's will. That led to chilling fatalism, expressed in the notorious statement by Charles Trevelyan, Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, who administered famine policy: 'The deep and inveterate root of *Social* evil remain[s in Ireland] and... the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and unthought of, as it likely to be effectual.' (Gray 1995. See also Gray 1999; Gray 2006; and Nally 2011). It is impossible to believe that a divine 'cure' by a million dead and a million fled would have been tolerated for, say, East Anglia.

British India also suffered from an Imperial provision politics that permitted famine, though generalisations about the vast subcontinent are impossible. But two things stand out: Indian food riots featured, not bargaining with local rulers, but looting markets and the destruction of the sowcars' records. The sowcars (or sahucars) were not rulers, but rather local usurers on whom peasants absolutely depended. When food rioters destroyed their records of debts, they collectively liberated themselves.²² The other unique feature was that in 1880, chaos prompted British officials to create the Famine Code of 1880. Departing from the gospel of *laissez-faire*,²³ it ordered Imperial officials to watch for signs of famine and take preventive measures. Thereafter, when the Imperial will was active, it could save lives. When officials had other priorities, as in Bengal in 1943, colonial subjects starved in their millions. In the Empire, then, the absence of both moral economy and political reciprocity permitted famine politics.

4. 'Nourish the People': China

Another Empire did much better. For no regime on earth was the politics of subsistence more central to its legitimacy and history than China, past and present.²⁴ Ironies abound, for Chinese policies created both the most successful politics of provision in world history and the greatest famine.

'Nourish the people' was one of the core missions of Chinese emperors for two millennia. Unlike the Victorian English, Chinese rulers assumed harvest failures were not unpredictable natural disasters, but rather recurring crises that could be weathered by prepared defences (Will 1990; Wong 1982; Li 1982; Will and Wong 1991). The ruler's duty was to buffer his people from devastation. Ancient texts agreed that 'famines were not caused by nature but by the negligence of the rulers' (Li 2007:2). The goal was to preserve social harmony, stability and public order, demonstrating that the Emperor was carrying out the mandate of

²¹ The continuation of exports of Irish grain to Britain during the Famine was not a huge factor in the severity of the famine; estimates are that retention of that grain might have lessened the famine's severity by about 16 per cent.

²² For Indian food riots, see Arnold (1979, 1984, 1988, 2000); Hardiman (1996); Sharma (1993); Subramanian (1985, 1991); and Yang (1979).

²³ At about the same time as English urban welfare thinking was doing so (Steadman Jones 1971). See the list of Indian famines (1750–1947) in *Cambridge Economic History of India* (1982), II: 528–31. For the Famine code see Brennan (1984) and Dreze (1995).

²⁴ 'No other civilization has had such a continuous tradition of thinking about famine, and no other nation's history has been so influenced by hunger and famine' (Li 2007: 2). The Chinese politics of provisions also included river maintenance to protect agricultural lands from frequent floods.

Heaven.²⁵ Indeed the combination of harvest failure and peasant rebellion had often sounded the death-knell of a regime. So the spectre of popular unrest kept emperors accountable. At the beginning of a dynasty, especially if they had conquered power, as in the case of the Yuan, Ming and Qing, emperors tried to fortify their authority and legitimacy with strenuous efforts to ensure stable food supplies. As the dynasty aged, however, other priorities such as war and imperial expansion intervened; the state's vigour waned; bureaucratic corruption mushroomed; and provision politics broke down.

The Empire's provisioning depended not only on paternalist ideology, but also on state capacity, in both revenues and competent officials. The Empire sustained a system of imperial 'ever-normal granaries' for every province and county (Li 2007). They bought grain in times of plenty and stored grain remitted as tax, so they could moderate dearths by releasing those supplies into markets. They were complemented by local granaries.²⁶ Among 'the incentives of local governance... amassing a stock of civilian grain was important if it helped to prevent chaos and rebellion in the area due to food crisis' (Shiue 2004: 106). Officials might denigrate merchants as wily and selfish, and try to prevent their market manipulations, but they did not hinder normal trading.

The imperial system of granaries was first realised in the medieval Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and it reached peak efficiency in the eighteenth-century High Qing period.²⁷ Chinese food riots²⁸ were not so much interference with the market, but rather a sort of pushback against the global reach of Imperial policy: they typically blocked shipments out of a grain-surplus area to fill other areas' deficits.²⁹ So against the Empire's programme of balancing out food supplies across time and territory, Chinese food riots brought the politics of provisions back down to earth, to the local and the present, to enforce local food sovereignty.

Ironically, while it prevented famines, the very success of famine prevention contributed something to massive increases in Chinese population in the eighteenth century (Li 2007: 381). Then as the Qing dynasty declined, granaries decayed; the massive Tai Ping rebellion and foreign invasion disrupted all; and huge famines returned to China in the 1870s, and again during the warlords' free-for-all in the 1920s. One American relief worker famously labelled China 'the land of Famine' in 1926 (Mallory 1926).

After the Second World War Mao Zedong built a powerful revolutionary state. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had proclaimed 'the conquest of hunger' as its core mission. (Li 2007: 342). But Mao's diabolical provision politics, in combination with some natural disasters, created a famine that cost perhaps 45 million lives during the Great Leap Forward (1959–62) (Ó Gráda 2008 and Ó Gráda 2009: 241–54). While agriculture was collectivised, and labour massively disrupted, the state seized grain, both to feed industrial cities and to trade for far too much imported machinery and weapons. Mao assured officials, 'If you don't [seize] above a third, people won't rebel.' (Dikötter 2010: 76–82, 88). John K. Fairbank called the famine a 'Mao-made catastrophe'.³⁰

²⁵ The Emperor's paternalist concern was ritualised each summer by the great pageant of his prayers for a bountiful harvest in Beijing's Temple of Heavenly Peace.

²⁶ Paternalist community granaries sponsored by local officials, and charity granaries for famine relief. See Li (1982) for a Chinese 'moral economy'.

²⁷ Li (2007), Will and Wong (1991). High Qing period: the eighteenth-century reigns of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722), the Yongzheng emperor (1722–36), and the Qianlong emperor (1736–96). For food riots during the Ming dynasty, see Tong (1991: 158).

²⁸ Wong (1982) shows that Chinese food riots were not resisting state demands for grain to feed cities and armies, as Charles Tilly suggested for Western Europe (1975).

²⁹ This illustrates that what we now call food sovereignty can be a very concrete local matter, not just a national statistic. Since 2000, tens of thousands of episodes of peasant resistance to land seizures occur in China each year, so many that they may not remain merely local, since land is a crucial gateway to food security (Walker 2008: 467, 474, 477).

³⁰ And also 'an all-time first-class manmade famine' (Fairbank 1986: 302–3). For a helpful review of the literature, see Bramall (2011). The lineaments of the Stalinist famine in the Ukraine in 1932–3 are similar (Conquest 1986 and Ó Gráda 2009: 233–41).

This reverse politics of provisions depended not only on central policy, but also on local state capacity: on zealous and ambitious local CCP cadres, who seized grain, forced peasants to accept starvation rations, and staged illusory ‘crop miracles’ for touring Party big-wigs.³¹ In the village of Da Fo, for instance, those local cadres and militia had previously been hardened to violence during the Japanese invasion and the subsequent civil war. Initially local farmers trusted the CCP too long, because it had come to their rescue during wartime. And there was a lasting hope that ‘if only Mao knew’, he would curb his abusive agents in the countryside (Dikötter 2010: 228–9).

Real resistance to the state was impossible, but many communities took collective action to survive. Dozens of attacks on state granaries and hundreds of attacks on grain trains were recorded – and the records are far from complete. Occasionally cadres were killed in public meetings. Thousands of arson fires were only a beginning (Dikötter 2010: chapter 26). But rebel leaders faced execution or re-education camps, also possibly lethal. ‘Resisters’ and protest ringleaders could be brutally punished: in one prefecture 67,000 peasants were beaten to death during the Great Leap Forward famine (Dikötter 2010: 294). So corpses piled up along village pathways.

Indeed the death toll might have been much worse but for the peasantry’s subtler ‘counter-action’: surviving by the ‘law of necessity’ as authorised by local norms directly counter to the regime’s systemic ethics. Village provision politics comprised ‘concealed production and private distribution’, i.e., pilfering, plus under-recording of local harvests and thus the state’s portion, often with the collusion of local cadres (Thaxton (2008); Wangling (2011: 285-92); Chen Yixin (2011) and J. Brown (2011). Thus the politics of provisions was, in the words of political anthropologist Gao Wangling, ‘the collective result of mutual struggles between the state and the peasantry...’ But recent analysts of famine warn that such pilfering was neither collective nor subject to the public scrutiny of a disciplined food riot, and that in the famine, ‘one person’s gain was another’s loss’. As famine grew more desperate, people turned against each other (Wangling 2012: 286, 290–2; Dikötter 2010: 214).

5. ‘IMF austerity riots’

Before price spikes triggered the food riots of 2008, their forebears, the ‘IMF austerity riots’, were triggered by global neo-liberalisation. Between 1976 and 1995, nearly 200 violent protests motivated by moral economies and empowered by provision politics resisted welfare cuts mandated by neoliberal international financial institutions (IFIs).³² Some of the protests even successfully challenged dictatorial regimes.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America bought into a Western development model, and with it a fiscal trap. They took out huge loans to finance infrastructure projects and food imports, as well as prestigious military assets (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Walton and Seddon 1994). Authoritarian regimes often rested on both force and a social contract: in return for popular deference, they promised better jobs and wages, and subsidies for food, housing, medical care and transport that made urban life viable.³³ By the late 1970s many were nearly bankrupt, so they turned desperately to the

³¹ Becker (1996). Dikötter (2010) tells of their staging of grain planted so densely that children would walk on a carpet of upright wheat!

³² Predecessors included Ceylonese riots, union-organised strikes and mass protests in 1953 against government plans to cut the rice subsidy (Rogers 1987), as well as popular resistance to Egyptian subsidy cuts in 1977, discussed below.

³³ Especially for rural in-migrants pushed off the land by neoliberal commercialization of agriculture.

World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).³⁴ The IMF made bail-outs conditional on their adoption of 'Structural Adjustment Plans', harsh neoliberal austerity programmes that included:

- elimination of protective tariffs, and greater freedom to foreign capital;
- privatisation of state-owned firms;
- and above all, deep cuts to public subsidies that made urban subsistence tenable for ordinary people (Walton and Shefner 1994: 101).

Besides urban workers, austerity cuts also hit middle-class professionals and white-collar workers employed by state agencies. So bankrupt states were trapped between their national constituents and global creditors.

These austerity programmes triggered subsistence protests, animated not merely by hardship, but also by:

- a moral economy of entitlements betrayed: protestors cried, 'Out with the IMF!' and 'Work, bread, justice and liberty!';
- enabling social networks: protests often occurred in communities with existing capacities for collective action, rooted in neighbourhoods, churches, unions and new social movements (Walton and Shefner 1994: 109–11, 119).

Now when subsistence politics was empowered by *both* moral outrage and existing frameworks for mobilisation, such protests might move a regime. Latin America fostered two-thirds of those IMF protests (1976–91). Typically rioters in the capital cities would target government agencies viewed as toadies to the IMF. In the neighbourhoods they looted supermarkets and stores. From there, protests radiated out to other cities. Crowds enlisted mainly the urban poor and trade unionists, but also middle-class teachers, students, civil servants and some professionals. The outcomes of these struggles varied, depending on governments' responses: sometimes severe armed repression, notably in both Pinochet's neoliberal Chile and the democratic Dominican Republic; sometimes a compromise mitigation of the austerity cuts (Walton and Seddon 1994).

These conflicts shook some authoritarian regimes to the core. In Mexico, for instance, they helped to end the 70-year regime of the 'state party', the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutionalised Revolutionary Party, or PRI). The years of failed austerity policies 'impoverished much of the PRI's social base.... [and] made it impossible for the state to maintain power using decades-old strategies of incorporation.' (Shefner 2007: 190) They also helped foster political transition in Venezuela. In his 1988 presidential campaign, Carlos Andrés Pérez blasted the IMF's austerity policy as a 'bomb that kills people with hunger'. But once in office he betrayed his promises with a severe austerity regime. The capital, Caracas, erupted in the *caracazo*: rioters torched buses and cars, barricaded streets, and methodically looted food, clothing and electronics stores. In return, army repression killed 300. Voters rejected Pérez's party at the polls (Walton and Shefner 1994: 126–9). The ensuing decade of street protests, coups and strikes ultimately helped put populist general Hugo Chavez in power. His 'Bolivarian 2000' regime guaranteed subsistence rights, now underwritten by oil wealth (Cannon 2009).

IMF austerity and provision politics also figured in regime change in Argentina. In 1989, food price spikes and austerity cuts to food subsidies led to widespread food looting, road blockades demanding welfare restoration, and Peronista victories at the polls. Food rioters

³⁴ There is a very large literature on the global politics of development and structural adjustment, and the politics of food. For introductions, see McMichael (4th edn, 2008) and Young (1997). Today's neo-liberal policies might be compared to the trade liberalisation of the eighteenth century that rolled back an older moral economy of protective regulation.

were by now seasoned veterans, and had networks from activist organisations and other group affiliations. They looted hundreds of supermarkets, while local Peronista bosses directed the looting of smaller shops. The president had to flee the Casa Rosario in a helicopter. Food rioting related to austerity policies continued in the 1990s and after 2000 across Latin America and elsewhere (Auyero and Moran 2007: 1344; Auyero 2007: 73–4; Walton 1998; and Roberts 2008).

In sum, moral economies, empowered by political networks, helped to bring regime change in several countries, and left-wing turns in others. Parallel riots against austerity welfare cuts had occurred earlier in Sri Lanka in Zambia (1986–92) and in nine Arab countries (Rogers 1987; Bienen and Gersovitz 1986; Walton and Seddon, 1994: 146–52, 172–3; Sadiki 2000). The ‘IMF austerity riots’ were provision-political struggles over cuts to the basic subsistence supports that were part of the social contract of many of these regimes. Those subsidies had made a new urban life viable for rural in-migrants pushed off the land, in some cases by commercialisation of agriculture. The solidarities of neighbourhoods, churches, unions and other organisations permitted strong protests on the basis of betrayed moral economies that foreshadowed the food riots of 2008

First cousins to the IMF austerity riots were the protests in Seattle at the 1999 WTO (World Trade Organization) Ministerial Conference. Protestors confronted longer-term survival issues of economic and environmental justice raised by neoliberal globalisation dominated by Western power and the Washington Consensus’s IFIs (Levi and Murphy 2006; Pleyers 2010; and Tarrow 2005).

All these protests against neoliberalism spotlighted the IMF’s and WTO’s ‘globalised’ detachment from provision politics and from political reciprocities that sustained it: they were not parties to the social contract they had shredded, and indeed their power did not depend on it. Like the British Empire in times of famine, they could fail to take heed and even feign innocence of the results of their policies. That globalised dissolution of provision politics was akin to the national dissolution in liberal nineteenth-century Britain. Neither was necessarily permanent or irreversible.

6. The food riots of 2008

Finally, the food riots of 2008 reflect a further critical stage in global neo-liberalisation. Many nations in the global South have lost food sovereignty: that is, control over their own food supplies. Their domestic food systems have generally been crippled by the Western-dominated global food regime (Friedmann 2005; and McMichael 2009a and 2009b). In stunning contradiction of the neoliberal free-market dogma of the ‘Washington consensus’, postwar US and European³⁵ farm policies subsidised agribusiness and fostered grain surpluses, then subsidised food exports, and dumped those surpluses as ‘food aid’ below the cost-of-production into developing nations, putting their small farmers out of business.³⁶ In 2007–8 grain price spikes were driven by ethanol production, meat consumption, commodities speculation, bad regional weather, and in some regions, population growth. That is the background to the food riots of 2008, which were not simply driven by hunger, but were often both inspired by breaches of social contracts and empowered by popular networks of solidarity.

³⁵ The European Union’s farm policy was embedded in its Common Agricultural Policy.

³⁶ Winders (2009, chapter 6). After decades of global urging, the 2014 US Farm Bill finally increased to about \$80 million the amount that could be spent to purchase food closer to disaster areas, rather than shipping food from the United States (Nixon 2014).

Egypt's 2008 food riots, for instance, were rooted, not in spontaneous urban crowds, but in the previous decade's construction of a powerful Egyptian labour movement plus networks of 'alternative politics.' They collaborated in 2008 to battle neoliberal privatisation as well as crony-capitalist corruption.

Egypt is typically categorised as a rentier economy, resource-poor, and dependent on a little oil, plus Suez Canal fees, US aid, and emigrant remittances to pay the bills. Its per capita income ranks as moderate, but that average masks gross and growing inequalities. In the 1950s Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab Socialism had nationalised most of Egyptian industry, as part of a massive welfare state providing virtual lifetime-jobs, a national minimum wage, and secure pensions, as well as subsidised bread. The agency of workers under Arab Socialism was succinctly dismissed by President Nasser: 'The workers don't demand; we give' (Beinin 2010: 12). This Arab socialism chimed with ancient Arab and Islamic values that Tunisian scholar Larbi Sadiki calls the 'democracy of bread'. The 'democratic bargain' was that Arab peoples paid their rulers political deference in return for their subsidising basic subsistence. '*Khubz*, which means bread, is used ... in a generic sense to refer to free education, health care and other services.' So, like the IMF austerity riots, the bread uprisings or *intifada al-khubz* referred to bread and more, much more. I suspect that modern authoritarian rulers have proclaimed the democracy of bread much more explicitly and loudly than ancient rulers, making it much harder to put that genie back in the bottle in hard times.

In 1974 Anwar Sadat began his *infitah* or 'opening up' to a mixed economy. In 1977, after bargaining with the IMF over economic reforms, Sadat's regime introduced an austerity plan that cut subsidies and raised prices on rice, petrol, and cooking oil, among other things. That brought millions of Egyptians into the streets for 'bread riots', to attack government offices. Egypt had tried to maintain a warfare state as well as a welfare state, so protesters shouted: 'Hero of the [Suez Canal] Crossing, where is our breakfast?' and 'Thieves of the Infitah, the people are famished.' The military killed 800 people. Rioting ended when the state reinstituted the food subsidies, and social welfare even improved until the mid-1980s. (Metz 1990; Sadowski 1991: 158-61; Walton and Seddon 1994: 172-3, 184-6; Gutner 2002). But welfare provision in real terms was sharply reduced during the later 1980s, especially for the poor (Harrigan and El-Said 2009: 80, 82-3). Two dozen major protests – strikes, riots, demonstrations – expressed similar popular outrage in nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Walton and Seddon 1994: 171-3; Sadiki 2000).

By 1991 Egypt was broke. President Hosni Mubarak had to swallow the IMF's neoliberal shock medicine, ERSAP (Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program), and it broke up Egypt's social contract. Protective import tariffs on rice were rolled back, which allowed below-cost western grain to ruin Egypt's small farmers. Real wages entered a long-term decline while food subsidies were cut (Harrigan and El-Said 2009). Egyptian factories were privatised, meaning severe cuts to precious jobs, wages and benefits. Each factory privatisation hit hundreds of families hard, so there was plenty of resistance.

In the decade before 2008, several million workers launched 3,400 strikes to battle the new private owners for survival wages, especially after 2004. The movement intensified after 2004 when the 'government of businessmen', cronies of Gamal Mubarak, Hosni's son, accelerated the sell-off of public firms (Beinin, 2011b: 190-91). By the end of 2006 the national wave of worker protest had become the largest Egyptian social movement since the Second World War.³⁷ The Mubarak regime also softened its repression, perhaps so as not to drive away foreign investors (Beinin 2012b: 106 and 2011b: 191). Besides protesting about privatisations and economic cuts, workers increasingly made a political demand: the

³⁷ My discussion of Egypt's food riots in 2008 and the labour militancy that fed into them relies heavily on the writings of Joel Beinin and Hossam El-Hamalawy, especially Beinin and El-Hamalawy (2007), Beinin (2008, 2012a and 2012b)), El-Hamalawy (2008a and 2008b). A broader context can be found in Harrigan and El-Said (2009).

formation of trade unions independent of the state's labour federation (the ETUF). By September 2007 the textile workers' strike leaders saw their demands as political: 'We are challenging the regime.' and 'I want the Mubarak regime to come to an end.' (Beinin, 2011a: 195, and 2012b: 102-3). The high point came in late 2007 when thousands of Real Estate Tax Collectors struck, besieged the Parliament, won a 325 per cent wage increase, and formed Egypt's first independent trade union. Their victory suggested new possibilities to other militant workers (Beinin 2012b: 103). That sustained workers' militancy created many precious battle-tested battalions, essential actors in the upheavals of 2008.

Meanwhile movements of 'everyday resistance' had been creating an alternative politics in spaces beyond the police state's control. The Second Palestinian Intifada (2000) inspired Solidarity committees, which were succeeded in 2004 by the Kefaya ('Enough!') movement against Mubarak's political overreach. Other movements for youths, workers, peasants and women appeared, and became known as 'Kefaya and her sisters'. Participant Alia Mossallam has detailed Cairo's 'larger organic flow' of the praxis of alternative politics in performance arts and electronic media, including videos documenting election abuses. All of this activism created a palpable 'us-ness', embodied in seasoned counter-cultural groups and precious contacts lists (Mossallam 2013). That was the other critical leg of the convergence of 2008.

Egypt's food riots in 2008 occurred not in Cairo but at Mahalla, a gritty city in the Nile Delta, packed with the 24,000 workers of the giant Misr textile factories and their families. Mahalla's textile workers had long been bellwethers for Egyptian workers. Their victories in massive strikes in 2006 and 2007 – the 2006 strike instigated by female workers – triggered national strike waves. Meanwhile rising food prices cut into family budgets. Since subsidised government bread was available to all, not targeted to the poor, it disappeared through smugglers' hands, and people died in bread-queue fights. Mubarak ordered the army to start baking bread and open new bakeries (El-Hamrawy 2008c). Then Mahalla's workers found that the gains they had 'won' in the strikes of 2006 and 2007 were not delivered – so they called a major strike for Sunday, 6 April 2008, to demand a national minimum wage and remedies for soaring food prices.³⁸

That led to a fateful convergence. Large, often youthful, mass protests in Cairo had lambasted the Mubarak regime's quiescence in regard to both the Second Palestinian Intifada and the Iraq war, and that helped fortify popular confidence (El-Hamrawy 2008c). But the cosmopolitan political opposition in Cairo had long looked down on workers' contesting 'merely' economic issues. They failed to recognise that in the police state, 'organizing large numbers of people outside state strictures is in itself a political act' (Beinin 2011c). In 2008, however, the Cairene opposition movements moved to collaborate with the workers, using mobile phones and Facebook to call for a national strike on 6 April in support of the Mahalla strike (Beinin 2011c).³⁹

On the strike weekend, security forces occupied the Mahalla factory to thwart a sit-in strike, because many previous strikes had been factory occupations. During Arab socialism, workers had come to think of factories as their own, and many families had worked in the same factory for generations. So keeping them out of the Misr factory was provocative (Beinin 2011a: 187). Furthermore, writes Joel Beinin, the leading authority on Egypt's labor movements:

³⁸ According to Masalla workers' close observer, Hossam el-Hamrawy, 'the strike was organised by the Textile Workers' League, an independent labour association formed last year [2007] following a wave of successful textile workers' occupations' (el-Hamrawy 2008d). That may account for the recriminations when the Mahalla strike committee 'settled' the strike under pressure from the regime, while more militant voices questioned their authority.

³⁹ They had begun to collaborate with Mahalla workers in September 2007 (Beinin 2012b: 101).

Factories and workers' neighborhoods ... are the locus of identity and sociability. Some families have been employed in the same workplace for several generations. ... These networks of social relations, in which the family is the central unit, sustain the workers' movement and make it difficult for the government to extinguish it without using massive force. However, by their nature these highly localised working-class networks cannot easily be projected onto a national scale. ... Their primary role is to support the social fabric of the community (Beinin 2013: 207-8).

Moreover, Beinin continues, 'workers' protests of the 2000s ... commonly demanded that state authorities intervene to defend their standard of living or their rights [vis-à-vis employers]. ... The discourse framing these demands invokes the Arab Socialism of the 1950s and 1960s or is reminiscent of the moral economy that valorises a nationalist populist pact' (Beinin 2013: 208).

So food-price protests began when factory shifts changed the Sunday afternoon of the aborted strike, filling the square outside with thousands of workers, their families and others, many of them relatives (el-Hamalawy 2008a). At first they chanted and demonstrated peacefully against sharp price increases, eyewitnesses reported. One cried, "Oh pasha, oh bey, a loaf of [unsubsidised] bread costs a quarter of a pound" (Beinin 2008). A grandmother in black lamented to an Al-Jazeera TV crew, "We have to express our frustration. The prices of all foodstuffs have been escalating: rice, cereals, meat – everything. People cannot even afford feeding themselves anymore" (Al-Jazeera English 2008).⁴⁰ When police and hired thugs attacked them with tear gas, beatings, and stones, as well as rubber and live bullets, the crowds battled back with brickbats and Molotov cocktails. They looted shops, blocked streets with flaming tyres, and chanted anti-regime slogans. The next day crowds of thousands ripped down large public posters of Mubarak.⁴¹ Socialist blogger Hossam el-Halamawy explains that although arson was carried out by poor urban youth, most of the violence was not random, but rather targeted 'symbols of power or wealth in society'. A burnt-out van was said to be a 'government van'. Restaurants were burned and looted that belonged to ruling-party businessmen who refused to close on strike day, and because of the jump in the prices they charged. The police and regime thugs were accused of torching and looting a Mahalla school, while Central Security Forces' conscripts were photographed vandalizing their own trucks (el-Hamalawy 2008a; Charbel 2008).

The strikes spread to physicians' and civil servants' offices, and to textile and cement factories, grain mills, and river transport across the land. Meanwhile in Cairo on strike day, people overwhelmingly stayed at home in support – even shopkeepers gave up their day's takings (Mossallem 2013: 128).⁴² Hundreds of Cairo and Helwan University students and faculty marched. A noisy rally of thousands in the enclosed grounds of the Bar Association chanted: 'The strike is legitimate against poverty and starvation' (el-Hamalawy 2008a). The lawyers later spent months defending arrested protesters. After two days Egypt's neoliberal prime minister rushed to Mahalla to cut a deal for renewed food subsidies, and a wage

⁴⁰ Al-Jazeera English (2008). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35jcJEde5FM>. The other best video is Reuters' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n61RPTRH3uc>

⁴¹ Besides Beinin and el-Hamalawy (note 47), my account relies on news reports from *Al-Jazeera*, Reuters, IRIN, *Agence Française-Presse*, *Al Masry Al-Youm* and others, especially Jones (2008a and 2008b), Charbel (2011), and Rizk (2010 and 2011).

⁴² Joel Beinin expresses doubts as to how many Cairenes stayed home on strike day, and believes Kefaya was weak by that time (2012b: 104). But he was in Mahalla that day, while Mossallem was an eye-witness in Cairo, and other press agencies reported Cairo streets to be nearly deserted. He emphasises that while workers took part in deposing Mubarak, there were only 'fragile and intermittent linkages' between them and the liberal opposition leaders and intelligentsia, and that indeed they were not a sustained social movement (2012a: 7 and 2011a: 198-201). Asef Bayat concurs that the loose coalitions of this period in the Middle East do not fit Western social-movement categories, but rather entail a 'process of solidarity building or the collectivities of disjointed yet parallel practices of non-collective actors in the non-Western politically closed and technologically limited settings' (Bayat 2013: 5).

increase, a tactical victory for popular mobilisation. Indeed Egypt increased its food and fuel subsidies by more than 20% between 2007 and 2008 (Harrigan 2009: 18-19).

But the regime took its pound of flesh too. The security forces 'arrested 331 people, beat up hundreds of others, critically wounded nine, and shot dead 15-year-old Ahmad Ali Mubarak with a bullet to his head as he was standing on the balcony of his flat'. They also used electric shocks, torture, sexual abuse and threats of rape. Two others died. In the wake of the security forces' riot, forty-nine residents of Mahalla al-Kubra were charged with conspiracy to destroy property and similar offences. In December 2008 an Emergency State Security Court (from which there is no appeal) convicted twenty-two of them and sentenced them to jail terms of three to five years. This unusual level of repression suggested that the regime feared a national workers' action (Beinin 2011a: 199 and el-Hamalawy 2008d).

Elsewhere in the Arab world, in Morocco (2007), Yemen, Jordan, and Tunisia, food riots challenged repressive regimes no longer able to deliver on their social contracts. Only in Morocco did rioters win relief (Schneider 2008; AlJazeera 2007, Gros et al 2012). In the Arab Spring of 2011, independent Egyptian labour journalist Mustafa Bassiouny declared, 'The chief slogan of this revolution is "bread, freedom and social justice", and this is precisely what workers seek to achieve through their struggles' (Charbel 2011). Jane Harrigan concludes that 'rising food prices were only one of many complex factors' that motivated the Arab Spring, but that indeed 'food prices increases which started in 2007/08 were one of the final nails in the coffin of many of the repressive regimes which were no longer able to deliver on the Social Contract' (Harrigan 2009: 29, 31).⁴³

West Africa also had many food riots in 2008. Here too, riots were not simply hunger-driven explosions of the belly, but informed by moral economy and sometimes enabled by popular mobilisations. I will leave this territory to Lauren Sneyd, who is studying it carefully (Sneyd, L.Q., Legwogh, A., and Fraser, E. D. G. 2013) but we can highlight some of the conflicts in which ageing authoritarian regimes confronted strong popular groups and organisations of workers, consumers, taxi drivers, or petty traders (Harsch 2008).

- In Côte d'Ivoire 1,500 women marched, protesting, 'Life is too expensive, you are going to kill us' and 'What will we give our children to eat and how will they go to school?'
That march was endorsed by a well-organised consumers' union
- In Cameroon two of those ever-dangerous *pop musicians* were arrested and charged with instigating food riots, one of them with a song entitled 'Constipation Constitution'! (Kariuki 2008)
- After violent food riots in Senegal, a coalition of consumers' associations, trade unions and other organisations sent a thousand marchers through Dakar. They carried empty rice bags, tomato tins and unpaid utility bills, wearing shirts saying 'We are hungry'. They called for President Wade to step down
- In neighbouring Mauritania the government responded to extensive food rioting with emergency food relief, price controls, reductions in rice import taxes, and subsidies to utility companies. It also consulted with grass-roots organisations, as did officials in Cameroon, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Guinea
- By contrast, after food riots in 2005, Niger had created a government ministry to coordinate food-price policies. So when prices spikes appeared in 2008, the government quickly launched remedies. And that, said one activist, 'has kept people from taking to the streets' (Harsch 2008; Berazneva and Lee 2013).

So it seemed that in Africa the politics of provisions required many governments at least to be seen to offer remedies to hungry and mobilised rioters.

⁴³ I am very grateful to Professor Harrigan for allowing me to consult her lecture (2012).

My last example among 30 countries wracked by 2008s food riots is Haiti. Rioting began in the city of Les Cayes: crowds looted shops and trucks of grain, and then emptied the grain stores at the military base of UN peacekeepers, who were despised as alien occupiers. One Les Cayes woman said, 'We are hungry and have given up on the UN and the Préval government to help us... we hear the UN trying to tell us every day on the radio that things have got better. It's a lie!' In the capital itself, massive crowds used huge one-ton trash bins to try to batter their way through the gates of the presidential palace, to enlist the president in person in their cause. One protester declared, 'Today we have to come get President Préval to join us, and to see what he has decided to do. We can't go on any longer.'⁴⁴ Another added, 'If the police and UN troops want to shoot at us, that's OK, because in the end if we are not killed by bullets, we'll die of hunger' (Loney and Delva 2008). However, Cité Soleil, one of the capital's largest slums, remained quiet. Residents explained, 'Many people just don't have the energy to take to the streets and demonstrate here the way they used to... The people in Cité Soleil are doomed' (Brown 2008). However, President Préval's televised address to the nation two days later was deeply underwhelming.⁴⁵

Provision politics was in fact, largely impotent in Haiti, because after they had looted stores and shops, rioters could not reach holders of wealth and power for relief. Both the government and the economy were in international receivership. The Duvalier dictatorship had been overthrown in 1986, in part by food riots, to be followed by regimes of corrupt and brutal army thugs, interrupted by brief interludes of rule by the charismatic and populist prophet, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Fatton Jr. 2002 and 2006; Dupuy 2007; Gauthier and Moita 2011; Girard 2010). But even Aristide evolved towards corruption and authoritarianism. He refused to make his Lavalas movement – a broad umbrella coalition of countless religious and lay groups – into a political party, preferring that both *vox populi* and *vox Dei* speak through him. He re-created the clientelist state, resting on armed gangs of thugs known as the Chimères, especially in the slums of Port-au-Prince. When Aristide was overthrown again in 2004, Haiti's international controllers (the United States, France, Canada et al) sent in UN peacekeepers, in the shape of the stabilisation mission known as MINUSTAH. They partly disarmed the gangs, but they also suppressed Lavalas demonstrations, sometimes with bloodshed. That is part of the reason why they were attacked in 2008. A central question about Haiti's food riots in 2008 would be whether remnants of social networks from both the gangs and Aristide's Lavalas movement helped people the food riots of 2008.

Haiti's food system was also bankrupt. The US and IFIs had forced Haiti to roll back protective tariffs on its staple, rice. So mountains of subsidised American rice were then dumped on Haiti as 'food aid'. What Haitians called 'Miami rice' put small farmers out of business, and rice production fell steeply. In 20 years Haiti went from self-sufficiency in rice to heavy dependence on American imports, fully exposed to global price spikes and external market turbulence.⁴⁶ The feebleness of the Haitian state and economy made bargaining by food riot and provision politics a hopeless proposition, or perhaps an international one, trying to shake relief from the hands of international donors.

⁴⁴ Sonia Jeanty, 'One protester killed as demonstrations grow in Haiti', Haiti Information Project (HIP), 4 April 2008, www.haitiaction.net/News/HIP/4_4_8/4_4_8.html; 'President Préval', Reuters, 7 April 2008, and <http://www.reuters.com/article/video/idUSN0835816120080409?videoid=79819>

⁴⁵ For instance, 'Haiti Senators call on PM to quit', *AlJazeera*, 10 April 2008

⁴⁶ Georges (2004); Michael Dobbs, 'Free Market Left Haiti's Rice Growers Behind', *Washington Post*, 13 April 2000; Bill Quigley, 'The U.S. Role in Haiti's Food Riots', *counterpunch*, 21 April 2008 www.counterpunch.org/2008/04/21/the-u-s-role-in-haiti-s-food-riots/; Carol J. Williams, 'Tracing Roots of food crisis in Haiti', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 2008; Oxfam, 'The Time is Now', 3 June 2008, www.oxfam.org/en/policy/the-time-is-now; Oxfam, 'Rigged Rules and Double Standards', 2002; *World Development Indicators*, www.worldbank.org/data/onlinebases/onlinebases.html; Oxfam, 'Haiti No Longer Grows Much of Its Own Rice and Families Now Go Hungry', 2008, www.oxfam.org/en/development/haiti-no-longer-grows-much-its-own-rice-and-families-now-go-hungry

7. Conclusion

In summary, food riots have worked in this century as an engine of provision politics to restore food security in some circumstances. These circumstances are: where there is present a nexus of shared moral economy and social contract – reciprocal obligations between the numerous and the powerful; and, I would argue, where there are capacities for effective political leverage on the part of, on the one hand, states and power-holders, and on the other, consumers – who would hold them accountable for provisions when local food sovereignty breaks down. Both the capacities and the outcomes of such food struggles depend also on experience and expectations shaped in previous trials by ordeal. Today an effective politics of provisions might summon relief resources far beyond the physical reach of crowds, from international food-relief agencies, for instance – so a popular *political* ownership of food sovereignty might be just as important as the food security underwritten by local or regional producers.

Perhaps like historic human rights struggles over slavery and women's rights, an effective right to food may entail decades more of global struggle. But perhaps the second step in that struggle might be to recognise the success and potential of the first steps, the struggles of food rioters. Jacques Diouf, Director General of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), said at the Rome Summit Conference on the Food Crisis in June 2008: 'It was only when the destitute and those excluded from the banquets of the rich took to the streets to voice their discontent and despair [that the world took notice]. The problem of food security is a political one. The time for talking is long past. Now is the time for action.'

Much depends on global players, just as in the past. The current food regime seems to be in transition. Since the 2008 food riots, international agencies like the World Bank and the IMF – and even Bill Clinton – have sometimes reconsidered the wisdom of neoliberal free-market dogma. Will food rioters, and food sovereignty movements such as the Via Campesina and the Right to Food movement, take their place as players with political leverage, alongside other players such as the IFIs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multinational food corporations, perhaps by making alliances with other players? (Friedmann 2005) That remains to be seen.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Diouf, reminded the assembled heads of state and government that they had been at this point before, in 1996 and again in 2002, promising both times to end world hunger. 'The facts speak for themselves,' Mr Diouf said. 'From 1980 to 2005 aid to agriculture fell from \$8 bn... to \$3.4 bn... Agriculture's share of official development assistance fell from 17 per cent in 1980 to 3 per cent in 2006.' This was despite the fact that farming provides the sole livelihood for 70 per cent of the world's poor. Addressing the same emergency summit, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underscored the threat to political stability and development: 'Nothing is more degrading than hunger, especially when man-made. It breeds anger, social disintegration, ill health and economic decline,' he told world leaders. 'Only by acting together, in partnership, can we overcome this crisis, today and for tomorrow. Hundreds of millions of the world's people expect no less.' The UN's response will be directed by the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis, launched by the Secretary-General in May 2008: www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2008/africa-struggles-soaring-food-prices.

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